

BY RAJU CHEBIUM • GANNETT WASHINGTON BUREAU • JUNE 19, 2009

WASHINGTON -- House Democratic leaders on Friday unveiled a broad health care reform plan that seeks to cover every American, cut escalating costs, intensify the focus on preventive care and end unpopular insurance industry practices like denying coverage due to pre-existing medical problems.

But the plan, which New Jersey Reps. Frank Pallone of Long Branch and Rob Andrews of Haddon Heights helped craft, lacks an important detail _ the cost. Details of the plan are subject to change after lawmakers hold hearings Tuesday through Thursday.

The Senate is working on two separate proposals.

"The two goals are really to bring down costs and cover every American," Pallone, chairman of a health subcommittee, said in a telephone interview. "The House plan is its own. It is not based on the Senate."

Some highlights of the House plan:

- People could retain their current plans if they're satisfied.
- Uninsured Americans or those dissatisfied with their plan could enroll in a new taxpayer-funded plan or one offered by private carriers.
- Out-of-pocket expenses would be capped and catastrophic coverage would be guaranteed.
- Every child would have coverage that includes dental and vision benefits.
- Medicare and Medicaid, the government-run programs for elderly and low-income Americans, would be improved.

-- Employers who don't offer coverage would have to help their employees get coverage or pay fines.

-- Everyone would have to be covered under some insurance plan or pay penalties.

-- The plan would take steps to reduce waste and fraud.

"This plan is about freeing financial waste within our system and getting more value for our dollar," Andrews, who heads a separate health subcommittee, said in a statement.

The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, which estimates costs, hasn't evaluated the House plan. President Barack Obama has said health care reform, which he has made his top domestic priority, could cost \$1 trillion over 10 years.

At least one New Jersey Democrat, Rep. John Adler of Cherry Hill, was skeptical of the plan.

"This draft does not do enough to contain costs, which is a fundamental part of the problem with our health care system," he said in a statement.

Republicans lambasted the plan as poorly conceived.

"Raising taxes, rationing care, and empowering government bureaucrats _ not patients and doctors _ to make key medical decisions is not 'reform,'" House Minority Leader John Boehner said in a statement.

A group of moderate House Republicans, including New Jersey Reps. Leonard Lance of Clinton

Township, Rodney Frelinghuysen of Harding and Frank LoBiondo of Ventnor, unveiled their own plan recently. Though its overall cost is also unknown, that plan rejects taxpayer-subsidized insurance.